



Full Length Review Article

IMPROVING ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS FROM ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED COMMUNITIES

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ARTICLE INFO

Article History:

Received 19th March, 2016
Received in revised form
26th April, 2016
Accepted 27th May, 2016
Published online 30th June, 2016

Key Words:

Economically disadvantaged,
Co-teaching,
Academic performance,
Economic background,
Special needs students,
Inclusion, cooperative learning,
Peer tutoring

ABSTRACT

Poor economic backgrounds of special need students pose a huge challenge on the academic performance of these students and it is evident that such students perform poorly than their peers. This literature addresses the impacts of poverty on the academic performance of special needs students and the impacts of inclusion, cooperative learning, peer tutoring, co-teaching, and material and psychosocial supports ways of improving the academic performance of special need students from economically disadvantaged communities. The findings indicate that co-teaching has had positive impact on the over-all performance of special needs students as well as their social well-being. The paper then concludes that the policy makers, the teachers and the administrators in the education sector should put in place measures that enhance teaching and learning that aim at assisting special need students gain high academic performances.

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INTRODUCTION

Special needs students are students with special educational needs whose education is usually aided in a manner that addresses their individual differences and requirements. These students have some forms of disabilities that disadvantage them from learning in the same environment and conditions as other students. An economically disadvantaged community is a community that cannot meet the needs of its members, especially the basic needs. Therefore, a student from an economically disadvantaged family comes from a poor family, which cannot provide the necessities required, by the school for the student to learn effectively. For instance, a student from a low-income family may lack finances to buy school uniforms, books, and other learning materials required by the schools. This paper analyzes the effects of the strategies used in teaching on the academic performance of students with special needs from economically disadvantaged communities. It eventually aims to answer the questions of whether the strategies put in place are effective in teaching special need students from low-income families by exploring the academic performance of such students.

The paper eventually outlines the recommendations for both the stakeholders and policy makers based on the findings on measures that would contribute to the improvement of the academic performance of this group of students.

Background

Special needs students are students who are disabled in one way or another and thus require special attention when in the process of learning. These students, apart from either physical or mental challenges, they harbor specific needs as some may have difficulties in learning specific subjects such as literary needs due to dyslexia or dysgraphia, difficulties in grasping special concepts, poor vision, or even intellectual disabilities which may result from poor mental development.

Such students require specific unique actions to aid their learning, otherwise their performance both in academics and other co-curricular activities will be below par. To help this category of students, specific learning strategies must be employed. These strategies can be either organizational, presentation, reading, or motivational, depending on the individual needs (Connell, Campbell, Vickers, Welch, Foley, Bagnalland Hayes, 2010).

Impacts of Economic Background on Student Academic Performance

While studying the impacts of socio-economic backgrounds on the academic performance of students, Okioga (2013) revealed that families with higher income are keener on the education of their children. The middle-class families also actively participate in the education of their children while families with lower incomes more often are not keen on the education of their children. This is because families with low socio-economic status usually lack the financial and the educational supports compared to the families with higher income. In addition, low-income families may have poor access or may lack the resources that support their children's development in school. Okioga (2013) assert that poverty leads to lack of resources and leads in limited access to resources that naturally affect the family decisions regarding their children's learning and education.

Even if students from economically disadvantaged communities accessed education, their academic performance would be affected drastically (Helen, 2012). For instance, a poor economic background exposes children to the following,

- Poor nutrition and thus poor health which naturally translates into poor academic performance in schools
- Lack of early exposure to rich language which helps in boosting cognitive development
- The students do not get the enrichment experiences such as after school and summer programs because their families cannot afford.

These three reasons make students from economically disadvantaged students unable to effectively compete with those from affluent families, hence their poor academic performance.

Students with disabilities are at a more risk of performing even worse than other students perform if they come from economically disadvantaged communities (Pugachand Wesson, 1995). These students first will lack a conducive encouraging home environment and may thus be burdened with home affairs such as neglect and rejection from other family members. In addition, most parents with special needs children will not see the need of 'spending much money' on such children because of their nature.

This notion plays a part even in wealthy families but is made worse by poverty. Students with disabilities require extra care, which would mean additional expenses, for instance, reading aids, hearing aids, and specific books among other special requirements. This may seem a burden to families that are economically disadvantaged, and thus, a child will be sent to school without some basic facilities that enhance learning. Students from low-income families do suffer lower self-esteem due to their social background; special needs students are not an exception and in fact, poverty doubles their problems (Austin, 2001). Therefore, will all these, special needs students from poor backgrounds, if not attended to with utmost care will continually suffer poor academic performance.

Strategies for improving poor academic performance of students with special needs

Research has revealed that there are clear differences in academic achievement between children from poor family backgrounds with their peers from average and wealthy families. Generally, poor children have lower academic achievement levels right from the early ages even before they start school (Jacob and Ludwig, 2009). Governments have put in place measures aimed at reducing the academic performance gap between the poor children and their peers, for instance, the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) initiative that introduced reforms to accommodate the special needs students and the poor students, making them at the same level with the other children. Despite the fact that students from poor families score below average on academic performance, different instructional strategies and techniques implemented at the school and the classroom can help close the performance gap (Lacour and Tissington, 2011).

In attempting to utilize strategies that would enhance improvement in these students' academic achievement, several underlying factors must be understood and thus tackled. The strategies must aim to diffuse the impacts of early experience obtained by these students. The poor background and the low social affiliation by these students at an early age must have created a negative attitude towards learning. Sutton *et al.* (2007) found out those children become aware of their social position at a very early age (ages 8-13) and this affects their social behaviors such as discipline, which has to be dealt with if their performance should be improved. Secondly, Frankham *et al.* (2007) realized that the right kind of relationships that helps in addressing both the social and learning needs of these disadvantaged children play a major role in helping students from poor families achieve in school. Several strategies can be used to assist poor special needs students to improve in their academic performance. These strategies can be divided into classroom support and psychosocial support.

Inclusion

One of the most common classroom strategies that can be used is inclusion. In this case, both the special needs students and the non-disabled students are educated in the same classroom. According to Hyde *et al.* (2014), inclusion means the right to active participation and equity through engagement in all aspects of daily life of a student. Inclusion ensures that both the social and academic content are addressed (Lamport, Graves, and Ward, 2012). Through inclusion, the disabled students, the poor, and the rich are all taught in one classroom and their social needs are addressed thus allowing them equal opportunities to excel. The teachers provide accommodation to all the students in the class by implementing multilevel and multidimensional teaching strategies fit for the diversity in the classroom are applied. Thus the teacher will be keen on the pace, depth, and rate of learning and makes necessary adjustments when necessary. Inclusion plays an important role in that it keeps the students active, most importantly, the special needs students will be kept active during teaching and learning by allowing them to equally participate in class activities as their peers (Foreman, 2011). Active participation is an important recipe for good academic performance.

Cooperative learning and Peer tutoring

Secondly, cooperative learning (peer learning) can be used to help poor special needs students as it involves social interaction and active experiences thus enabling the students to feed knowledge to each other (Lampton, Graves, and Ward, 2012). In this method, the students are mixed to form heterogeneous teams of between four to six students; slow learners, those who are poor and lack some learning materials and those with enough learning materials are grouped together in discussion groups. The students here share their learning materials, knowledge, and responsibilities thus the students, irrespective of their economic backgrounds, benefit equally. Cooperative learning improves academic performance of poor special needs students in addition to making them accepted by their peers.

A cooperative Integrated Reading and Composition model was used in a study and it showed that students under cooperative learning improved in reading comprehension and vocabulary (Slavin, Stevens and Madden, 1988). Research on social outcomes of cooperative learning on special needs students have shown a significant increase in the friendships formed by members of a team irrespective of their economic backgrounds. Generally, special needs students achieve better in cooperative schools compared to their counterparts in other schools, and these students had a 30% more likelihood of being selected as friends by other students (Slavin and Stevens, 1991). Peer learning/teaching involves students working in teams where one student tutors the rest. Meta-analysis studies have shown that peer learning increased academic achievement of both the tutor and the tutee in addition to increasing friendship between the team members (Cook, Scruggs, Mastropieri and Casto, 1986). In general, both cooperative learning and peer tutoring have been found to improve both academic achievements of poor and special needs students as well as improve their psychological strength to equally compete and co-exist with their peers.

Co-teaching

Co-teaching is one of the most effective method of assisting special students improves their academic performance. Co-teaching occurs in classes where special needs students are integrated with other students in a normal classroom. This type of teaching is contrary to the traditional historical teaching model where students with disabilities were taught in a pullout instruction with the aim of helping them meet set goals (Paulsen, 2008). Co-teaching as one of the strategies used is teaching environment where more than one teacher collaborates in teaching some students (Aliakbari and Nejad, 2013). In technical terms, co-teaching is 'the pedagogical setting where teachers collaboratively use their pedagogy, knowledge, and assessment'. However, under the special needs education framework, co-teaching refers to the collaboration between a general education teacher and a special education teacher with the aim of delivering instruction together to a group of students that include those with special needs in a manner that is flexible to meet their learning needs (Friend, 2008). Effective co-teaching practice requires the input of three vital experts; the general educator, the special educator, and the administrator (Friend and Bursuck, 2009). The general

educator is more concerned with the delivery of the content while the specialist attends to the special needs by making use of the special strategies while the administrator ensures the provision of the necessary requirements that enhance effective co-teaching (Fennick, 2001).

In another quantitative study by Pugach and Wesson (1995) on 18 students from fifth-grade and the impact of co-teaching on them, it was found out that special need students preferred to be in co-taught classes rather than be in their special classes. The special needs students were thus found to have a positive perception of school and their motivation to attend school was increased. Co-teaching leads to the development of learning communities in the classroom thus promoting a safe, positive environment where students accept the physical differences as well as the economic differences through formation of quality friendships (Dieker, 2001; Austin, 2001). The relationships built in this case blur the impacts of both disability and economic background by keeping the students at an equal social level. Apart from improving their abilities, their self-worth (self-esteem and self-confidence) is increased (Hang and Rabren, 2009). It is noteworthy that a special needs student from a low-income family suffers from lower self-esteem and poor self-confidence.

Material and psychosocial support

Students from deprived background lack the power to learn as their colleagues irrespective of whether they are disabled or not. Therefore, the schools in which these students learn have a role to play (both in the classroom and outside) in helping poor special needs students improve in their academic achievement. With availability of funds, schools can offer special programs similar to the out of school learning that is usually undertaken by the rich students (Hirsch, 2007). Apart from being disabled, these students lack material possession that ought to keep them at par with their peers. Therefore, material incentives such as learning support materials should be given to the students as motivation rewards for improvements in performance. This, together with other motivational acts by the schools, teachers and other students will make the students enjoy being in school, which is a good step towards good performance. The schools should also talk to and maintain a good relationship with the parents of these children on the importance of giving them support from home. This is important because most poor parents tend to neglect their disabled children.

Conclusion

From the analysis given in this literature, it is evident that special needs students require special attention from both their teachers and other stakeholders. Additionally, it has been shown that the economic background of a special need student affects his/her learning in one way or another such that students from affluent families find it easy to learn while those from low-income families lack both material and psychological stamina to effectively learn, which eventually translates into poor performance. Having ascertained that the social gap affects learning experiences and thus performance, strategies that tackle the social aspect of the students' lives to bridge the social gap should be applied in addition to other strategies. This paper has talked about some of the effective

strategies for this category of students. Inclusion, cooperative learning and co-teaching have been found to be productive techniques that increases student learning, and their effects are evident in the students' academic performance. Most research has supported this fact, and the reasons have been found to revolve around improved instructional practices and better support for the special needs students. It is also important to note that these strategies play a major role in the social development of students, especially those from disadvantaged economic backgrounds. Therefore, it can be concluded that effective strategies of teaching are necessary for students with special needs as well as the other students from disadvantaged economic backgrounds. These teaching methods if implemented would go a long way in bridging the gap between special needs students and other students, and more specifically, uplifting the special needs students from poor backgrounds to feel like other students. This will at the end help in improving their academic performance.

Recommendations

In the view of the analysis given in this paper, the following reconsiderations are suggested,

- The policymakers should enact policies that focus on measures that improve the engagement of disabled students from poor families in education by engaging the education managers through training to support and lead the implementation of the effective teaching strategies discussed in this paper.
- The government should increase its measures to identify and thus support the special needs students, especially those from economically disadvantaged communities. This is crucial because some special needs students from low-income backgrounds are neglected and may not be in a position to receive the support from the government and other NGOs
- Individual schools should work to create in school and out of school environment that allow special needs students from poor backgrounds to develop learning relationships. Out-of-school learning programs for these students will allow them get the extra learning time that their counterparts from rich families have.

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